

Mount Vernon Memorial Highway
(George Washington Memorial Parkway-portion)
Runs alongside the Potomac River from Mount
Vernon north toward Washington
Arlington, Alexandria (Independent City), Mount
Vernon, Washington
Fairfax and Arlington Counties
Virginia, District of Columbia

HAER No. VA-42

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Mount Vernon Memorial Highway
(George Washington Memorial Highway [portion])

HAER No. VA-42

Location: Parallels the Potomac River from Mount Vernon to Washington, D. C.
Located in Arlington, Alexandria (independent city), Mount Vernon, Washington, D. C.; Fairfax and Arlington Counties, Virginia, and the District of Columbia

Dates of Construction: 1929-1932

Architect/Builder: U. S. Bureau of Public Roads

Present Owner: U. S. Government

Present Use: Public road, no commercial traffic

Significance: The George Washington Memorial Parkway portion of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway is significant as the first parkway constructed and maintained by the U S. Government and as the first such road with a commemorative function explicit in its name and alignment. The southern portion is probably the least altered of such early roads in the United States, and distinctive features mark its special quality.

Historian: Michael Wilderman, National Park Service, DSC-NEF

Transmitted by: Jean P. Yearby, HAER, 1985

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The roadway is of original concrete slab, with some areas of asphalt. The four-lane roadway (six lanes in part) is approximately sixteen miles long, with landscaped plantings.

A new alignment was constructed between Four Mile Run and Roaches Run during construction of National Airport in the 1940s. The parkway was widened to six lanes between the airport and Route 395 in the mid-1960s. The circle terminus at the north end of Alexandria was altered and southbound lane relocated at Memorial Bridge circle. There were safety alterations made in several intersections in 1984-85.

The original construction drawings, circa 1929, consisting of about 400 linen tracings (24"x36") prepared in five colors, have been accessioned by the National Archives' Cartographic and Architectural Branch, located at 841 S. Pickett Street, Alexandria, Virginia, assigned to RG 30, Bureau of Public Roads.

Sources of Information

National Register nomination form, prepared June 1980
Historic Resources Study, in preparation for the National Park Service, 1984

Addendum to:

Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, *Mount Vernon*

Running along the Potomac River for fifteen miles linking
Arlington Memorial Bridge, D.C., with Mount Vernon, VA,
via Arlington County, Alexandria City and Fairfax County
(Arlington County,) Fairfax County (and Alexandria City)
Virginia

HAER No. VA-42

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

MOUNT VERNON MEMORIAL HIGHWAY

ADDENDUM TO HAER No. VA-42

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(Two pages of data previously transmitted to HAER collection)

Location: Mount Vernon Memorial Highway stretches fifteen miles from the Arlington Memorial Bridge, District of Columbia, through Arlington County, Alexandria, and Fairfax County, following the Potomac River to Mount Vernon, Virginia.

UTM: 18/321160/4306050 to 18/318600/4286440
Quad: Washington West and Mount Vernon

Date of Construction: 1929-1932

Architect/
Builder: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads

Present Owner: George Washington Memorial Parkway
National Park Service
Department of the Interior

Present Use : Vehicular roadway, no commercial traffic.

Significance: The Mount Vernon Memorial Highway was initially conceived in 1886. Constructed from the years 1929-1932, this parkway was completed to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Washington. Mount Vernon Memorial Highway was the first parkway that was constructed and maintained by the U.S. Government. Consultants for the parkway included three important figures from the Westchester County Park Commission, Jay Downer, engineer; Gilmore Clarke, landscape architect; and Henry Nye, landscape plantsman. Constructed at the beginning of the Great Depression, the parkway is a masterpiece of landscape architecture with its road alignment, changing topography, plant compositions, simple yet substantial structures, and its ever changing and breathtaking vistas.

Historian: Elizabeth M. Nolin, 1988

Mount Vernon had become a popular pilgrimage site even before George Washington died in 1799. In 1858 Mount Vernon was declared a national shrine¹ and in 1860 the Mount Vernon Ladies Association purchased Washington's home² so that it could be better preserved. The years following the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, Americans became increasingly interested in their colonial and early American roots.³ Visitors to Mount Vernon in 1885 totaled 35,000; by 1928, the numbers had increased to 400,000.⁴

In 1886, M.B. Harlow suggested the first plan for the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway which would connect Washington, D.C. with Mount Vernon, Virginia. Harlow, then treasurer of the City of Alexandria, thought of this road as a combination of the Appian Way in Rome, Italy, and Westminster Abbey, in London, England, "with bridges over the various streams along the route." Seventeen miles long and 250 feet wide, the highway was to be divided into equal sections, one section, approximately one acre in size, for each state. Harlow suggested that monuments and statues be built along the highway. Also included in his scheme was the planting of indigenous trees and flowers.⁵

This notion of a memorial or pilgrimage road to Mount Vernon caught the attention of Congress in 1889. That same year Congress directed Lt. Col. Peter C. Hains of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers to survey the Virginia shore for a site for a "national road."⁶ Hains suggested that this road should be of "monumental character" and a "symbolic link" between Mount Vernon and Washington, D.C.⁷ The need for a road decreased when the Washington, Alexandria, and Mount Vernon Railroad built an electric rail line to Mount Vernon in 1892, but the idea of a road from Washington to Mount Vernon lived on. The memorial highway was brought up once more in the 1902 Report on the

¹ Edward W. Bennington, "Roads to Mount Vernon," Virginia Cavalcade, (Winter 1960-61): 36.

² *ibid.*, 37.

³ Kress-Cox Associates, P.C., Historic Structures Report on the Arlington Memorial Bridge, (Washington, D.C., 1986), 108.

⁴ Bennington, 35.

⁵ Mount Vernon Boulevard Terminal, Lloyd House Library, Alexandria, Virginia.

⁶ Kress-Cox Associates, P.C., 29.

⁷ Frederick Gutheim, Worthy of the Nation: The History of Planning for the National Capital, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 95.

Parks in the Nations Capital by the McMillan Commission.⁸ The memorial highway was included in this report as an extension of the parks in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, in 1907 construction started on what was to be the first "true" parkway, the Bronx River Parkway in Westchester County, New York.⁹ This parkway was mainly started as a clean-up effort in the Bronx River Valley,¹⁰ but it also provided an opportunity to create a pleasant drive into New York City and to give the city a visually acceptable approach that it so desperately needed from the north.¹¹ Individuals associated with this project were Jay Downer, chief engineer; Gilmore Clarke, landscape architect and superintendent of construction; and Henry Nye, noted landscape plantsman. Prior to the construction of the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, the main road used to travel to Mount Vernon was present-day U.S. Route 1. As with the Bronx River Parkway, this southerly approach to the nation's capital from Mount Vernon was also in dire need of a "clean up." The route was lined with billboards, rubbish heaps, gas stations, tourist camps, and railroad yards.¹² According to many, this road was certainly not a fitting route to travel between Washington and Mount Vernon, the home of our first president.

On May 23, 1928, Congress directed the U.S. Commission for the Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington to survey the Virginia shore for the best route to Mount Vernon, from Washington. The survey, conducted by the Bureau of Public Roads, started in June. The search was narrowed down to two routes, one along the Potomac River and another further inland.¹³ Both routes had the same specifications. A previous report in 1927 showed the inland route being less costly than the

⁸ Established in 1901 by Senator James McMillan, the McMillan Commission was responsible for a report on the capital city's parks. The commission was made up of two architects, Charles McKim and Daniel Burnham, a landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and a sculptor, Augustus St. Gaudens.

⁹ Norman T. Newton, Design on the Land, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belnap/Harvard Press, 1971), 600.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 598.

¹¹ *ibid*, 600.

¹² Thomas Means and Associates, Inc., Simonson and Mount Vernon Memorial Highway June 29, 1987, video interview-rough edit.

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Report on Alternate Routes for the Proposed Memorial Highway, Washington, D.C. to Mount Vernon, Virginia, Bureau of Public Roads, January 1929, 1.

river route.¹⁴ Because all of the crossings of the inland route were to be at grade whereas the river route had a number of streams to cross. In the 1928 report, the idea of the parkway crossing intersections at grade was considered a "source of great danger." Therefore, bridge crossings needed to be considered at each of these intersections, which in turn made the river route less expensive.¹⁵

Thomas H. MacDonald was Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads during construction of the parkway. Realizing the significance of this memorial highway, MacDonald selected the finest parkway consultants available, Jay Downer, Gilmore Clarke, and Henry Nye,¹⁶ all then associated with the Westchester County Park Commission. Other personnel who worked under MacDonald included R.E. Toms, Principal Highway Engineer in charge of design, J.W. Johnson, District Engineer in charge of construction, J.V. McNary, Senior Bridge Engineer for Unit III, and Wilbur H. Simonson, Senior Landscape Architect for Unit IV.¹⁷

The construction of the parkway was divided into six units. Unit I included the construction of riprap foundation for the seawalls and the hydraulic fills. The contract for the riprap foundation was awarded to Smoot Sand and Gravel Company of Washington, D.C., while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did all of the hydraulic fill. Construction on this unit began September 16, 1929, and was completed on July 6, 1931. Unit II construction began on March 10, 1930 with completion on May 9, 1931. This unit consisted of other grading, small drainage structures, and incidental construction. The contractor for this work was Vincent Schiavi of Buffalo, N.Y. Unit III covered the construction of all the bridges¹⁸ (for additional documentation see HAER Nos. DC-19, VA-42A - 42D). The architectural elevations for the bridges were designed by Gilmore D. Clarke.¹⁹ Test borings were conducted by Cranford Company of Washington, D.C. Merritt-Chapman and Scott Corporation of N.Y., was awarded the contract to construct all of the bridges. Work on this unit began April 17, 1930, and was finished on November 21, 1931. Unit IV was constructed in two sections, each of the sections being awarded to a different

¹⁴ *ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ Means and Associates, Inc.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Final Construction Report on the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway 1932, Bureau of Public Roads, 1932.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, Final Report on Pavements, Unit IV Sections 1 and 2, 1931, Bureau of Public Roads, 1931.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, Final Report on Unit III Bridges, 1932, Bureau of Public Roads, 1932: 4.

contractor. Paving, curbs, and guard rail were included in this unit. To accommodate the different soil beds along the route three different road surfaces were designed; on the most stable of soils the pavement was reinforced concrete, on slightly less stable soils a bituminous concrete on a concrete base was used, and on the least stable soils bituminous concrete on hydraulic fill was used. Section one of this unit covered the area from Arlington Memorial Bridge to Hunting Creek. This contract was awarded to MacDougald Construction Company of Atlanta, Georgia. Section two of this unit started at the south bank of Hunting Creek and ended at Mount Vernon. Roberts Paving Company of Salisbury, Maryland was the contractor for this section. Work on Unit IV was started on March 18, 1931, and was completed on February 10, 1932.²⁰

Beyond its interest as an engineering project, the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway represented a new departure for the federal government as a landscape architecture project. Therefore vistas, road alignment, plant composition of specific landscapes, and structures such as bridges, all played an important but equal part in the design of the parkway.

"Parkways; the term now denoted a strip of land dedicated to recreation and the movement of pleasure vehicles. The parkway was not itself a road, it contained a roadway."²¹

²⁰ Final Report on Pavements, 1.

²¹ Newton, 597.

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